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**Testimony before House and Senate Education Committees**

- **(Governance Structure for Education)**

**Tuesday, February 25, 2014**

An overview and recap of my professional experience

- Dedicated my career to Vermont education
  - Taught for 6 years
  - Principal for 6 years
  - Assistant Superintendent or Superintendent for 24 years
    - As superintendent, my most rural community was Montgomery in Franklin County
    - My most suburban community was Essex Junction
    - My entire 36 year career was spent in three supervisory unions, two with five school districts and one with three

I've been a superintendent-leader with the Vermont Superintendents Association

- My superintendent colleagues honored me with leadership positions over my final decade, initially being voted as a Trustee of the Vermont Superintendents Association, and later as an officer with VSA
- In 2008 I was named by my peers as Vermont Superintendent of the Year and I represented Vermont in competition for National Superintendent of the Year
- Over my career, I was pleased to represent VSA on an array of think tanks, legislatively directed committees, and commissions.
  - I was a member of a state-wide group that has properly gotten renewed attention of late: the State Board of Education's *Transformation Policy Commission* which published its report in 2009, "Opportunity to Learn." "Opportunity to Learn," in part recommended changes to Vermont school governance.

I present today as a citizen interested in what is best for society, and more important, its children through a strong system of public education.

- Those days as an active school administrator are now a part of my past. Today I present myself not as a school administrator, but as a Vermonter from Franklin County who cares deeply about the vital role of our public schools as social institutions.

- My personal philosophy isn't complicated: *as go our schools goes our nation. Strong schools result in a strong Republic, and as a responsible society we adults owe it to our children and our children's children to ensure we provide for them with the strongest possible system of public education.*

### 21st Century Learning

- The present and future world for our children places new demands upon them. There are skill sets and aptitudes required of them that are essential for their personal success and for the success of our society. Now required of them are:
  - Modern ways of thinking.
  - And modern ways of working.
  - And modern tools for working.
  - And modern skills for living.
- We are already deeply into the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We are well past the time to ponder 21<sup>st</sup> century learning opportunities for students. It is time to act on their contemporary needs.

### VSA / VSBA's Agenda for a World-Class Education

- I am impressed with (and proud of) how our School Boards and Superintendents Associations have taken the lead with Vermont's Agenda for a World Class Education.
- The Agenda makes sound use of many of the foundational and seminal studies and publications of the past fifty years.
- The Agenda is progressive as it calls for changes in the manners of how we get after the business of education.
- In its call for changes, the Agenda addressed multiple audiences including teachers, administrators, school boards, the Agency of Education, the State Board, and the General Assembly.
- The Agenda has already served as the basis for emerging legislation and public policy, and I commend you for the attention you've already given to the Agenda.
- As you may recall, for Vermont to realize a World Class Education System, a five point agenda was set forward:
  - Assuring success for every student
  - Supporting a new vision for teaching and learning
  - Engaging and supporting families and communities
  - Delivering and using world-class technology,
  - And directly related to today's conversation ... *providing effective leadership.*

An unsuccessful school governance effort, a Commission's report and the model under consideration

- About a decade ago, I spent nearly two years serving the Essex Merger study. A high-powered committee of sixteen dedicated citizens met every two weeks to consider the benefits of a unified union. The committee started out polarized, split right down the middle on whether or not to unify. I am proud that the committee's focus throughout the study was on expanding student opportunities. At the end of their work, they were remarkably of one mind ... 16-0, that by unifying under one board and one budget the Essex Town School District, Essex Junction School District, the Essex Union High School District, and potentially the Westford Town School District their students would be better served. Regrettably, the eventual vote was defeated at the polls. Reasons for the voters' defeat included:
  - A sense that its "always been this way" and that things did not need any profound change
  - A lack of any perceived school crisis coupled with general complacency with local schools
  - For those focused on finances and not children, the projected cost savings were neither immediate nor adequate
  - Confusion over weighted voting on the proposed new single school board
  - A misperception that a unified union was mainly about administrative convenience and not about promoting efficiencies and expanding educational opportunities for learners
  - As it was in the era before high school choice became law, a sense of loss for the community that had historically enjoyed high school choice.
  - And what I learned, is that despite two years of legitimate study and a coherent and unanimous recommendation by a group of local citizens, that changing how we deliver education is unlikely to occur without a state-wide vision.
  
- I mentioned earlier the State Board publication, "Opportunity to Learn." The authors comprised a strong group hailing from a broad cross-section of VT including higher ed, business and industry, preK-12 and technical education, home schools, legislators, state board members, PTA leadership and students concluded that current law, 16 VSA §421(a): "A town shall constitute a school district ..." is not only outdated, but even worse is impeding student opportunities.
  - Unlike students who came before them, today's global learners no longer simplistically define "community" as their hometown.

- By confining educational opportunity to +/- 279 school districts' definitions of educational opportunity causes far too wide a range of opportunities for learners, some far better than others.
  - Instead, the Policy Transformation Commissioners recommended a reorganization of school districts: *"The Commission believes that a regional district governance system will provide better opportunities for Vermont children to learn."*
  - The Commissioners felt that the structure of supervisory unions had run its course, and that a modern structure of "education districts" would serve students better.
  - While it did not specify the absolute reduced number of districts, the Report's "end game" would result in a *"phased process that merges existing districts and supervisory unions into regional education districts to expand the capacity, variety, and quality of learning opportunities responsive to the changing needs and interests of Vermont's new generation of learners."*
    - I presented more detailed information about "Opportunity to Learn" to House Ed on January 15, with documents posted to the Committee's web list of resources.
      - <http://www.vtvsba.org/12-15-09report.pdf>
      - <http://www2.leg.state.vt.us/CommitteeDocs/House%20Education/Opportunity%20to%20Learn/1-15-2014~Michael%20Deweese~Summary%20Presentation.pdf>
- And today, I am gratified to be joined by my colleagues from VSBA / VSA who have given their time over the past two years as we've examined visions for an improved approach to school governance. The model outlined by the House Education Committee conforms to our thinking of what could work in an effort to transition to an improved education delivery system.
    - It is a model that has learned from unsuccessful local experiences across Vermont like the Essex Unified Union effort.
    - It is a model that deconstructed and reassembled the ideals of "Opportunity to Learn."
    - It is a new model that is respectful of students' well articulated needs for what needs to be different about their education.
    - It is:
      - Practical.
      - Student-centric, and not constrained by adult barriers.
      - Designed with Vermont values squarely in mind.

- And it is mindful of an applied scale that works for our state.

### Your outline includes concepts that are timely

- It is 2014, and Vermont cannot afford throw-away kids. Our current governance structure is riddled with redundancies and inefficiencies. We must marshal our precious education resources in order to make schools as relevant as possible for all learners. This means some governance re-organization is necessary.
- At the same time, we know our student population is decreasing while costs are increasing. Again, reorganizing our governance structure is a way to address those conditions.
- And, as I noted earlier, parochial town-centric thinking about “keeping school” +/- 279 potentially different ways is outdated. Globalization is expanding exponentially, and is our kids’ future. We must get better organized and govern our schools around that very fact.

### The concept is Vermont-relevant

- We’ve looked under the hood of how other states have reorganized their governance structures. Maine and New York come to mind as examples.
- The problem is, it’s all about location-location-location. What works elsewhere can’t necessarily be wholly transplanted in Vermont.
- The model you’re considering takes very seriously the culture of Vermont.
  - There is little love and even less understanding of supervisory unions in Vermont, yet it remains a dominant school governance structure.
  - Vermonters are neighborly by nature, and routinely find common ground between and among towns.
  - Vermonters have experience with sharing other services between and among communities (law enforcement, water districts, libraries, health clinics and in many cases schools to name but a few). Merging educational services into more coherent arrangements would not be a foreign idea.
  - Vermonters care passionately for their children, and want the best for them.
  - The scale of change under consideration is not radical ... you are not talking about mega-districts. The scale of proposed change is practical.
  - We know that every schoolhouse has its own DNA that deserves to be honored and appreciated. Your construct

envision school-based councils to advise principals on school-specific ideas and concerns.

- And quite importantly, the model enables communities to apply their own logic on how best to merge and organize. In this way, Vermonters get a direct say in influencing their new school district.
- And as necessary, the model further sets forth protocols to move forward with any communities that are recalcitrant in evolving on behalf of their children.

The key components include:

1) Effective July 1, 2019, supervisory unions will cease to exist in favor of a delivery system made up of Pre-K to 12 districts governed by a single board and operating with a single budget.

2) Pre-K to 12 districts will be formulated with an eye toward improving equal access to learning opportunities and opportunities for greater fiscal and operational efficiencies

3) The Pre-K to 12 districts will respond to a set of educational and community-based criteria that preserve and enhance Vermont values including community involvement and accountability.

4) The minimum standards for eligible Pre-K to 12 districts correspond generally with size and configuration details currently in place under Act 153 RED formation guidelines - serving 1250 students, etc.

5) Existing school districts have until mid-2017 to self-determine their alignment in a new (or currently existing) Pre-K to 12 district.

6) Waivers can be sought to the minimum standards if educational and community-based goals are met. However, the systems must be Pre-K to Grade 12 single districts.

7) During the period 2014 to 2017 the process for forming into a new Pre-K to 12 districts generally conforms to the existing Act 153 process (although consideration may be given to streamlining the process)

8) The bill would create a legal/fiscal work group to examine and make recommendations to the General Assembly related to equity issues (if any), school choice implications and address tax rate implications and matters of voting/representation issues associated with new single district board configurations. This work will be completed by January 2015 in order to address relevant issues and "clear the path" to creation of Pre-K to 12 districts that might confront those issues.

9) The bill would create a design team of well-qualified, thoughtful, fair,

and experienced individuals knowledgeable in the organization of the education delivery system. This design team would monitor progress of voluntary mergers - 2014 to mid 2017; conduct community engagement activities in regions where newly proposed Pre-K to grade 12 districts were not taking shape; develop the criteria, process and overall plan to assign/create new Pre-K to 12 districts where districts had not self-assigned during the period 2014 to 2017; present the plan to the State Board of Education for approval in order that as of July 2019 the education delivery system was characterized by some number of Pre-K to Grade 12 single school districts.

This is an urgent matter, and requires action (now)

- Our past is not our children's future.
- The urgency for this work is two-fold.
  - Adults have let down our children for too long on this subject. The last truly significant change to how Vermont's schools were organized was over a century ago. The result is that children today are paying for the sins of their fathers' lack of action.
  - Secondly, kids only have one shot at a comprehensive, meaningful, and well-organized preK-12 public school experience. Each year we don't get this right means a less than opportune school year for too many learners in Vermont's classrooms today. They're waiting for us.

Closing

- I have been moved to be a part of the work on this to date. It has been especially satisfying to be surrounded by others who care so very deeply about Vermont's children and our state's education future. In many respects, it has been a highlight of my career.
- I am gratified with how seriously you're approaching this vital subject. Bravo to you. You are demonstrating courage that's absolutely necessary. I applaud you for not being swayed by adult politics in this conversation as you focus on the needs of children.
- This is now properly in your hands. You are the statesmen and stateswomen of our time. On behalf of Vermont's children and their children's children, thank you for being the agents of this critical change.

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